

## Junkworld

The sky opened.

Magrador the thirsty, dragon of the third age, lifted her head from her horde at the roaring, screaming, indescribably noisy landing of yet another troop ship. In her domaine, scattered with the bones and armour of previous invaders - Human, draconian, dwarvish, orc and anticipated more species before they succeeded in dragging her down - yet another wave of invaders, confused, unaware of what or where they were.

The latest visitor had done a creditable landing, considering it had been under heavy fire from several different craft attacking about it. Still slick and indescribably masculine - if it hadn't been for the wave of hairy little parasites that swarmed off screaming and waving weapons she'd have considered trying for another clutch of eggs - before, obviously, rending him asunder; this thin point in reality required continual thinning of encroaching species, particularly since reproductive limitations between species are not over-enforced. Not that all communities relied on individual prowess - behind that ridge no rain fell, and there was the deadly desert, mainly inhabited by overgrown sandworms (a disgrace to the title of 'worm', but big), sandwiches who dissolved with a bucket of water and, of course, humans, who are as bad as cockroaches for getting in everywhere. As a flyer she could get up high enough to make out the Emerald City and Oz, where there was little violence, and no death. But no birth either, so their competitiveness was limited, and not worth attacking.

Many spacecraft were landing on the desert, and combats were breaking out between warbots and wormriders, tribesmen and stormtroopers - a forked tongue ran over scaled lips. For a predator not averse to carrion, anybody fighting with somebody

else was opportunity. With very few exceptions - the elephants holding up the world and the dung beetle pushing the sun across the sky, mainly - it didn't matter who won, there'd be wounded and meat for the survivors.

The titanic humanoid holding the sky up was stung once too often and clapped his hands together, flattening a couple of squadrons of fighters that had been busily annihilating each other, and swatting a troop transport out of the air. The jolt this gave to the sky brought several small stars crashing down, and dislodged a mess of UFOs, skyclippers and species that nested in the clouds, including angels - a mixed party of centaurs and cyborgs galloped across to sooth his ruffled feelings, while the rest of us cheered the additional chaos.

It was no surprise when the combination of bombing, giant and supersonic boom brought on the anticipated avalanches, rock slides and cave-ins - the region was transected by masses of mountain ranges, no few of which were riddled with caves, tunnels, mines and subterranean rivers - by now swarming with species that like it down there, and have marked out their territories, at least until the next rift opens.

A good selection this time. Sometimes you got peaceful, non-aggressive species, which were almost immediately slaughtered or enslaved. Sometimes an aquatic section would drain into a desert, leaving its inhabitants threshing and dying in the dehydration, or a dalek wave or indoor droids finding themselves on a rocky plain or sand dunes, but mostly species were adaptable enough to put up a decent fight. And it wasn't always the most obvious invaders who came out on top - she remembered a tank battalion, with grey-scaled armoured infantry support, who had been wiping out a horde of savages wielding fire-hardened spears. Now descendants of the tribesmen, with better weapons admittedly, were out there culling the newcomers, while only one tank had left any offspring to the present.

Mechanical vehicles require spare parts, regular repairs, while energy weapons need regular recharges from their armoured teammates.

Those spacefarers were going to get a shock, too, when they realised the sky was hard, half black, painted with stars and rails on the blue half for the sun to run along. Their hyperdrives and antigravity would never get them home to their empires or trading routes.

It wasn't always powerful teeth and claws although - she allowed something that might have been a grin, if you happened to be a crocodile, mould her features - they certainly didn't do any harm; the ant men with their natural social behaviour, the burrowers, the fast breeding, the fast running away, the well camouflaged, magically talented - all the evolutionary factors for race survival, magnified by generalised sapience.

She watched as the battles sorted themselves out then luxuriously stretched her much-scarred, much regenerated body. Time to join in the fun, before the best treats were all gone.